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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces focus group interview research. It presents a description of the principal characteristics of such research, consideration of some applications by colleges and universities, a description of the planning and implementation involved, and examples from a study using this approach at Carleton College, Minnesota. To begin, the paper defines focus group research and explains how it differs from other qualitative research methods. Focus group research involves small numbers of individuals drawn from a population that is appropriate to the particular interests of the researcher. Sessions are conducted by the researcher or a trained moderator. Several examples of the use of focus group research by colleges and universities follow. Next, the paper considers four types of research applications that are appropriate for the choice of focus group research over other formats: (1) as an initial step for new research; (2) in conjunction with quantitative studies; (3) to aid the interpretation of results from surveys; and (4) as a means of investigation. Examples are given of focus group use at Carleton College. A lengthy section describes the planning, conducting, and logistical considerations involved in focus group applications. Concluding sections explain research costs and the analysis and use of findings. Twelve references are included. (JB)

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Focus Group Interviews: Applications for Institutional Research

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While qualitative research approaches to educational issues have been part of the landscape for many years, only recently have any of those techniques captured the attention of appreciable numbers of institutional researchers. In the past, relatively few educational researchers, whose interests led them to the hard-to-measure characteristics of their institutions, used qualitative methods, such as those employed in ethnographic and interview studies. But today increasing numbers of researchers are embracing qualitative research, in part because of the demonstrated utility of the focus group interview in business sector marketing research. The potential of this methodology for probing the subtleties of institutional management problems has been recognized in education, and as a consequence, focus group studies could easily become, or may already be, the first research experience of a qualitative nature for many in the institutional research profession.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an introduction to focus group interview research. That introduction begins with a description of its principal characteristics, and includes the identification of some of its applications by colleges and universities. In addition, the various elements of the job of planning and conducting focus group research are discussed, using examples from the focus group studies conducted in the admissions research of Carleton College. While this report will not serve as a definitive and complete guide to the conduct of successful focus group research, it should be of interest to anyone preparing for the experience in an institutional research setting.

What is focus group research and how does it differ from other qualitative research methods?

In general, research is identified as qualitative when its purpose is to make observations about individual experiences, feelings, attitudes, perceptions, and thinking, using open ended techniques of inquiry. That is to say, the response alternatives for individuals who serve as the subjects of qualitative research are not constrained along narrow response dimensions. The feature which most clearly distinguishes focus group research from other kinds of qualitative research is the group discussion. While that discussion centers on issues which are of interest to the researcher, it involves the exchange of opinions, personal reactions, and experiences among members of the group. Group discussion substitutes for the directive questioning which is part of most other approaches to the task of gathering information. In focus groups, the atmosphere is permissive, and the interviewer sanctions the expression of all kinds of opinions about the matter at hand. The important assumption is that information produced under these circumstances will be richer, more complete, and more revealing than that which can be obtained in, for example, a series of individual interviews.

Typically, a focus group involves relatively small numbers of individuals drawn from a population that is appropriate to the particular interests of the researcher, and the sessions are conducted by the researcher, or a trained moderator, whose task is to promote free and active discussion of topics relevant to the research questions and issues. It is essential that anyone who is

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contemplating focus group research realize that it has very specific purposes and that a well defined process must be followed. For this reason, several examples of the use of focus group research by colleges and universities are provided.

How have colleges and universities used focus group research?

Although few in number, the reports of focus group studies that have appeared in the institutional research literature give a sense of the purpose and value of this methodology in higher education. Bers (1987), for example, illustrates her discussion of focus group methodology in market research with examples of research conducted at Oakton College. The state of purpose in that study was to ". . . examine the college choice decision-making processes of adult students and their impressions and attitudes about Oakton College's programs and services." In keeping with a common, but not universal, notion about the purpose and principal virtue of focus groups, the intent was to generate hypotheses for a future quantitative study. Bers' study is of particular interest and value because it is an example of how focus group methodology can be used in the process of developing a theory. In this case, the theory concerns the ways adult students experience their world.

Other examples, demonstrating the value of these methods in admissions marketing research, include a comprehensive market review by a community college, which used focus groups to study problems in the achievement of its marketing objectives (Wilhelmi, et al., 1987), and the use of focus groups in an effort to assess and improve the quality and effectiveness of college recruitment materials (Burdick, 1986). With a special interest in adult education programs, Buckmaster (1985) has recommended that focus groups be used in the process of finding new markets, designing new programs to meet the particular needs of those markets, and promoting those specially tailored educational programs.

For Beloit College, holding focus groups with newly arrived freshmen has been a means of learning about aspects of the college selection process that relate to ease of choice by prospective students (Dehne, Brodigan, and Topping, 1990). Indeed, for a variety of reasons and purposes, prcatices like this have become a routine part of New Student Week activities at many institutions. At Carleton, to name another example, two and sometimes three sessions are conducted with new freshmen each fall with the purpose of evaluating various elements of the admission process, especially the recruitment publications. Dehne and his associates (1990) report another instance in which focus groups were used to study the admissions market. In this example, the Women's College Coalition conducted focus group sessions with high school girls and parents of high school girls, in order to learn about their views on women's educational issues. The findings were subjected to further study using quantitative survey techniques, as were some of the new ideas for marketing strategies which those sessions inspired.

As additional examples of the use of focus group research in the university setting, Griffith and Kile (1986a, 1986b) report that focus group discussions with current students provide a means of identifying marketing strategies for services available from the campus health center. Their work covered student medical services related to contraception, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, and prevention of alcohol abuse. In these cases, the authors found focus groups to be an easy and inexpensive way of gathering information bout the feelings and attitudes of students. They obtained suggestions from students for the layout and design of advertising materials, and they learned about student-held attitudes toward matters such as confidentiality. Methodologically, one of the interesting facts about these studies is that the authors regarded the information they obtained from the focus groups to be sufficiently reliable to serve as the basis for new marketing activities. They did not operate under the common assumption that this kind of qualitative study requires confirmation through quantitatively based studies.

Considerations for the conduct of focus group research: a case study

The following discussion has the main purpose of describing the use of focus group research in fairly broad terms, and it uses examples from Carleton's focus group research for purposes of illustration.

The consideration, when the use of focus groups is contemplated, is whether the purpose of the research is appropriate to this technique. Judging from my experience and from the reports of others (Greenbaum, 1988; Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988), four distinct types of application are appropriate for focus group interview methodology.

Four applications for focus groups:

1. Focus groups may serve as the initial step in a new program of research, especially if the ground to be covered is unfamiliar. These sessions have the potential of acquainting the researcher with a new field of study, or of providing an introduction to an unfamiliar population. In addition, they can be used to learn about the vocabulary, jargon, or phraseology that should be adopted in order to communicate effectively with the subjects of research project (Greenbaum, 1988). By this means researchers can determine, for example, whether admissions terminology such as financial aid, scholarship, and self-help, have the same meaning for prospective new students as they have for people who conduct college recruiting programs. Based upon the focus groups results, questionnaire items or interview questions which concern these topics could be worded so that the researcher's intended meaning matches the respondents' likely interpretation of the question.

   Also in preparation for a quantitative research project, one might view the focus group session as a "familiarity audit" (Greenbaum, 1988). For example, if a researcher is interested in learning about the attitudes of prospective college students from urban high schools toward private colleges in rural locations, he or she ought to have some information at the outset about the kinds of perceptions those students have about private, rural schools. That knowledge would allow the researcher to develop a questionnaire containing items which would measure the extent of those perceptions in a randomly obtained sample of urban high school students.

2. Focus groups can be used in conjunction with quantitative studies as part of what are known as triangulation procedures (Krueger, 1988). In such cases, an issue or research problem is studied using more than one technique in order to establish confirmation of a finding or to broaden the researcher's understanding. In research, which is so often observational or correlational, the substantiation of a finding using more than one research technique can strengthen the researcher's reason to believe that a particular finding is reliable.

Triangulation is employed at Carleton College each fall when focus groups with new freshmen are used to obtain information that might corroborate the findings from the annual mail survey of students who were offered admission to Carleton. Because, among other things, that survey provides the principal basis for a quantitative evaluation of admissions publications, it is very important to get confirming evidence when, for example, a publication receives low ratings and becomes a candidate for expensive revisions.

3. Information obtained from focus group sessions can aid the interpretation of results from mail or telephone surveys. For example, after obtaining survey responses to learn about the effectiveness of Carleton's admissions brochures, free-wheeling discussions of the various attributes of publications are encouraged among freshman focus group participants in order to obtain advice about specific improvements we might make in those publications. The key observation, required for a proper adjustment, may be too subtle to be revealed within the quantitative results of a questionnaire.

4. Finally, despite objections from some quarters (e.g., Biel, 1979), focus group research can be used all by itself as a means of investigation. Morgan (1989) points out that in the sciences the purpose of research is not always as narrow as the marketing objective of ". . . making accurate projections about future sales . . ." His conclusion is that representative sampling with standardized survey questionnaires is not essential to every research enterprise. Furthermore, Morgan asserts that ". . . there is no a priori reason to assume that focus groups, or any other qualitative techniques, require supplementation or validation with quantitative techniques."[1] In the Carleton program of focus group research, this position was eventually adopted, albeit cautiously, and focus group results became the main source of research information contributing to some very important marketing decisions.

Carleton's application of focus group research

In choosing to use the focus group methodology in Carleton's program of minority admissions research, the main considerations extended across more than one of the four classifications of focus group applications. Initially, the intent was to increase our familiarity with the views of minority students who were engaged in the college selection process. These sessions had the broadly defined purpose of probing into the backgrounds, attitudes, and perceptions of minority students who made inquiries about admission to Carleton. From these sessions we expected to obtain information that would enable us to conduct a quantitative survey of minority students.

However, as our work progressed our strategy changed, and we set aside the plan for a quantitative survey.[2] Our first four focus groups, conducted in two large midwestern metropolitan areas, provided us with useful information about the issues that were important to minority students in their experience with the college admissions process. Subsequently, with questions stated in the language and terms of the focus group participants, we held a focus group on the Carleton campus with enrolled minority students.

The information extracted from this session, including several direct quotations, served as the basis for a new question and answer brochure which became an admissions publication expressly for minority students who inquired about admission to Carleton College. After that step, our research continued with additional focus groups conducted to evaluate that brochure and glean additional information.

Although the brochure received good marks along several content and presentation dimensions, the critical finding from those additional sessions was that for many minority students a separate brochure is a signal that the institution provides separate treatment for its minority students. These focus group participants also expressed concern that white students were not provided with the same information. The perception fostered by that concern was that large numbers of students at Carleton would be uninformed and unconcerned about minority student issues. In order to correct that impression, the Carleton admissions office has produced a new edition of its principal recruitment publication (referred to as the "viewbook") that incorporates much of the material which appeared previously only in the minority publication.

Planning and conducting focus groups

In each of the four focus group applications, the planning and research activities have distinguishing components. For example, if the focus group is the only means being used to sample opinion or examine perceptions, then one may need to pay special attention to questions of how many sessions to conduct and whether there are particular segments within the population which should be treated as separate groups. In some instances of this kind, a researcher might wish to quantify the observations which have been made in the course of one or more focus group sessions. The quantitative outcomes might even be subjected to statistical treatments of one kind or another. It is not difficult, for example, to imagine using a Chi Square test to compare the frequencies of verbal references to a particular concern in one group as opposed to another. Depending upon the circumstances, this kind of treatment of data may or may not be appropriate, and consultation with a statistical design expert may be advisable. In focus group research, the opportunities to use statistics are rare, and of course, numerical results should not be used to suggest that the findings can be projected to a population, if random sampling was not used to select participants or if other aspects of the research design are flawed.

Logistical considerations

With few exceptions, the planning required for a series of focus groups is complicated and extensive. Because at the outset of this project everyone at Carleton was unfamiliar with focus group research, admissions marketing consultants were hired to guide the process, perform

[1]Incidentally, Morgan's book offers a bit of historical perspective on focus groups, both in marketing and in social science.

[2]While a quantitative survey of minority students was abandoned for this particular research effort, it should be noted that we have continued to collect survey data from our admissions prospect populations each year. Our quantitative studies of those data include separate analyses for minority students, and those efforts have benefited from the knowledge we acquired in the focus group research.

analyses, and offer recommendations. The following summary of our experience is meant to describe the basics of our learning experience and to highlight what we could consider to be the most important lessons.

Normally, the initial planning should involve everyone who has an interest in the project. In our case, that planning included representatives from several campus offices, including the offices for admissions, publications, minority affairs, development, and institutional research. The investment of time, thought, and energy, in a cooperative planning process by a substantial number of staff members, ensures that the purpose, scope, methods, potential outcomes, and limitations, are widely understood and accepted. In many focus group projects the expenditure of energy and resource is just too great to risk the possibility that an individual with administrative responsibilities related to any aspect of the research will have strong objections to the completed work.

Once the purpose of the focus group research is understood and an appropriate population is identified, a site for the focus group sessions must be selected. The needs of the researchers must be balanced with those of the participants. In some cases, a campus meeting room will suffice and in others, a commercial site which is set up for purposes of focus group sessions will be required. Commercial sites have several advantages. They have one-way observation rooms, audio recording setups, and accommodations for video recording. These sites are equipped with a large table where the participants sit in a U formation facing the moderator who sits with his or her back to the observation window. That formation presents an unobstructed view of the participants to the researcher and to other observers sitting behind the glass. Facilities of this kind, operated by experienced staff, exist in every major city and in many suburban areas.

When a facility is rented, especially if it is in a distant city, the screening of potential participants is often handled locally by people who work for the facility. However, the researcher must be aware of the importance of that selection process, and he or she should be an active and alert participant in the discussions which establish the particulars of those brief telephone solicitations. In the research we conducted at Carleton, names, addresses and phone numbers of qualified participants were obtained from the admissions office records, and the screening was largely a matter of asking "Are you going to college next year?" and then inviting the individuals, who said yes, to participate. A small cash incentive is normally offered during this call, and it may be worth mentioning also that snacks and soft drinks will be provided during the session.

Audio recording facilities are a must, because this is the primary means of collecting the information yielded by the focus group participants. The audio record will be transcribed into a printed record of the sessions, and should become part of, or serve as the basis for, the final research report. Ordinarily, two recordings of each session are made. One goes to the typist, while the other is available to the researcher immediately.

In addition, a video recording of the proceedings is strongly recommended because there is considerable information in the facial expressions and gestures of the participants. While a video recording can add considerably to the cost, it is actually quite easy to make from behind the one-way glass, separating the participants from the observers in the typical focus group facility. A video professional should be hired to capture the session on tape, so that the researcher is free to make notes of his or her observations. The video record, including close-up shots of participants voicing strong opinions, is a valuable supplement to the focus group report. The camera records facial expressions and body language that never find their way into transcriptions of the audio record and rarely appear in the notes of the observers.

Selecting a moderator is another important aspect of the research preparation. For educational research, it is imperative that the moderator have considerable experience in, and knowledge of, education. Because the issues in the Carleton research project involved minority students and admissions issues, a minority admissions counselor from another educational institution was hired for most of the focus groups we conducted.

Another matter requiring careful preparation and special concern is the moderator's discussion guide. This guide should include the moderator's introductory remarks and a list of the issues to be discussed. It should also show the order and length of each part of the discussion, and the areas of particular interest, where the moderator is expected to probe more deeply or let the discussion wander along interesting tangents. The guide for our sessions, always included a set of introductory remarks, welcoming the participants and describing the purpose of the two-hour session. Those words were followed by a round of introductions allowing each participant to speak about his or her background, interests, and plans for college. Incidentally, each participant has his or her first name printed in large letters on a place card in plain view of the moderator and the observers behind the one-way glass.

There is more than one motive for conducting these participant introductions. While it is certainly true that the researcher wants to obtain detailed background information which will help with the interpretation of remarks made in subsequent discussions, the success of the focus group depends upon establishing a common base of interests and concerns among the participants. A good discussion is more likely when participants realize that they share similar interests, experiences, and problems. For focus groups in general, a common body of experience among the participants is required, and one of the interesting prospects for the researcher is to find different assessments of common experience: how it felt, what it meant, and how it all came out.[3]

Following the introductions, topics are set before the group one-by-one and the moderator's task is to encourage any and all relevant comments. To preserve a free and easy flow in the discussion and a natural progression from one topic to the next, it is particularly important to avoid a regimented format in which every individual is solicited for an opinion before moving on the next topic. Some individuals may need encouragement, and some will take longer to jump into the discussion, but overall the dis-

[3]As another requirement, some focus group experts believe that there is an advantage in having participants who do not know each other; they may be freer with their opinions in that circumstance. Because of the relatively small size of the population from which we drew names, we were unable to select students with that precaution in mind. Consequently, some participants in our groups attended the same high school and knew each other prior to the session. From what we could see, those relationships did not detract from the discussion (cf. Fern, 1982).

cussion will be more fruitful if the moderator is patient, rather than insistent, allowing participants to enter the discussion as their comfort levels permit. Prospective moderators should consider the recommendations offered by Bers and Smith (1988) for handling different kinds of focus group participants including, among other interesting sorts of characters, the ax-grinder, the self-styled expert, and the non-participant.

In this context, the number of participants needed for a lively exchange of views should be considered. The ease or difficulty of the moderator's job will certainly be affected by the size of the group. Focus groups can produce desirable results when sizes vary between 4 and 12. In general, when the size is near the low end of that range, chances are greater that the diversity of opinion and the amount and quality of discussion will be less than desirable. On the other hand, when the numbers move toward the upper end of that range (or beyond) the group can be more difficult to manage, and an excessive amount of facilitator intervention or management may be required. When several people speak at once, the audio recording becomes unintelligible, and disruption is an unfortunate consequence of efforts to exercise control. In this case, information is lost, and the discussion is fragmented.

Perhaps the most difficult problem in establishing the size of the group is predicting how many of the invited individuals will actually show up for the session. If the researcher is unfamiliar with the population and the research site is in a distant city, the size of the group may be particularly difficult to anticipate. When conducting these sessions on one's own campus, over-recruiting by 20 percent may produce the desired number of participants, but when you are beginning a program of research with a relatively unfamiliar population with less interest in your request or your purposes, it may be necessary to over-recruit by as much as 50 percent.

Depending upon the nature and purpose of the research, the number of sessions in the overall program of research may be an important concern. In Carleton's research with minority students, the use of multiple sessions became very important because we decided to use focus groups as our primary means of gathering information. Thus, in a three-year program of research, we conducted 15 focus group sessions in 6 major metropolitan areas and on the Carleton campus. That number of sessions reflects, in part, a concern that minority students from different geographic regions might respond differently to the same set of issues. It also reflects our concern that men and women would have somewhat different sets of experience in the college admissions process. We held separate sessions by gender.

Upon completion of each session, the researcher should take a few additional steps to maximize the gain of new information. One of these steps is to get reactions and comments from other observers, including the moderator. This step should be taken immediately, while memories are fresh. Another useful exercise for the researcher is to add as much detail as memory allows to the written notes which he or she made in the course of the focus group session. For larger groups with fast moving discussions this step may be especially important to the researcher who wishes to have the most complete record possible.

The costs of focus group research

The costs associated with focus group research can vary considerably. When a commercial facility and its staff are used, there are basic charges for the use of the rooms and additional charges for the telephone screening of participants. Further expense comes with the cash payments which are made to the participants, and with the refreshments provided during the session. Add to those items, the cost of a moderator and, possibly, a research consultant, as well as travel expenses, and the total could be as high as $10,000 for two sessions. On a cost per subject basis, that amount will appear to be much greater than any other kind of survey one might wish to conduct.

On the other hand, the costs will be considerably less for a focus group conducted on campus. In some cases, a psychology department laboratory with one-way observation windows (used for research in social or developmental psychology) may even be available. In other cases, focus groups can be conducted without observers in a separate room. Depending upon the purpose of the study and the population to be studied, on-campus facilities may, or may not be appropriate, but the costs will be substantially reduced when they can be used.

The best overall recommendation about cost is that the researcher incorporate careful comparisons between the cost of focus group research and the cost of alternatives into the discussions that are held during the planning phase of the work. On most campuses, budget considerations are an important determinant of how questions and problems are investigated, and it is important to realize that focus group research is not very often a quick, easy, and cheap means of conducting research.

Analysis and use of focus group results

The analysis of focus group sessions should in large measure be driven by the purpose of the research. If the purpose of the research is fairly straightforward and narrow, e.g., to find the language appropriate for survey questions or admissions publications, the analysis may consist of little more than reviewing notes and transcripts to identify relevant material.

On the other hand, if the focus group is part of a process in which the researcher expects to develop a theory about how prospective clients view some aspect of their lives, then the analysis must be more elaborate. We might for example, wish to develop a theory about how personal goals and social attitudes relate to the expectations which high school seniors have about college. To learn about the possible relations between these variables, a well defined set of procedures would be required.

In general, the researcher should devise procedures which lead to verifiable conclusions. That is to say, the analytic process should be well defined and systematic so that if it were to be repeated by another researcher using the same data, it would produce the same findings. Of course, the conclusions could still differ if the researchers had different biases and preferred different interpretations.

Conclusion

While it is clear that focus group research is to be recommended for a variety of purposes, the institutional researcher should proceed with an extra measure of caution in some circumstances.

For example, when a high level of confidence in the results is important and when a particularly deep understanding of an event or phenomenon is sought, the researcher would be well advised to use focus groups only in triangulation or in exploratory studies. The application of more than one research procedure will provide information about the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation. Are the outcomes of studies which use different approaches convergent, inconsistent, or contradictory? It is easy to imagine that all techniques

would point to the same general proposition about the question, but it is just as easy to imagine that the different methods would produce alternative or even contradictory propositions.

In another vein, there is the concern that individual behavior may differ from the group behavior seen in focus group situations. Until the results from studies appropriate to this question are available, the experiences described, the verbal exchanges, the opinions, and the attitudes that are observed in focus groups must be interpreted cautiously.

Such caveats notwithstanding, institutional researchers will find focus group research to be a useful and important addition to their methods repertoire.

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